

Time is short, but your watch is slow

By: CalicoCat

Once a month, with the utmost discretion, two young women meet and part in a Shinjuku love hotel.

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Chapter 1

Kou is dozing fitfully, and when Haru senses her breath quickening, her muscles tensing as though she's running from something or running to someone, she shakes her gently and runs hands through her short dark hair.

“Heyyy... When's your flight?”

Kou rolls slightly, so she's resting on her side, one arm reaching leisurely up past Haru's shoulder so she can stroke the black fringe and make blue eyes visible again.

“Mmmm... six thirty... I don't have much time.”

Haru takes her watch from the faux futurist cabinet beside the bed. It's a child's watch, or if not that exactly, then childish in part: bright colors, chunky hands, merchandise for some anime series that no one now remembers.

“Then you can stay a while longer.”

Kou nestles against the other girl. They're lying on top of the bed, clothes scattered to the corners of the room like a tornado had passed there. It ought to be cold, but the warmth from each other makes the room pleasingly tropical.

“Your watch is slow.”

A hand runs up Haru's side, across her right breast so the palm barely skirts darker and more sensitive skin, then up to her shoulder and down her arm until fingers interlock with fingers.

“I don't know why you don't get something more accurate. If money is a problem I can...”

Haru squeezes her hand.

“It’s special. You know it was a gift from...”

“Shhhh.”

Kou places a finger to Haru’s lips. That’s one of the forbidden subjects.

Kou has rules. She has rules for nearly everything, but she particularly has rules for how, and when, and where they can meet. Haru wouldn’t be so careful, but she understands that Kou is thinking of them both, so in this, if maybe only in this, she does as she’s told.

Always pay cash.

Never take all the money out of your account in one go .

They spread it over the month so that their intimacy is broken up into thousand yen chunks added to the groceries, or gas for a motorbike, or a business lunch in Ginza.

No speaking of friends or family .

The time they spend together is a time capsule, cut off from the outside world; the last two people on earth left alive.

Never arrive at the same time, and never leave together.

And never the same hotel twice.

Haru worries about that; she worries that they’ll run out of hotels before they run out of each other, and she doesn’t like the idea that they’d have to meet in some family-run *ryokan* . But for now there’s always one more place to stay: rock’n’roll, yakuza, samurai or sci-fi, they still haven’t quite exhausted the places to lie together. This time Kou’s room was Evangelion-themed, and Haru insisted they take it, happy to give up Hello Kitty for a chance at Third Impact.

Kou thought it strange that she'd been asked to lie naked on the bed, while Haru worked her fingers furiously inside her jeans; and when the spasms finally subsided she pulled out her hand, fingers still slippery with desire, and said between gasps,

"I'm so fucked up."

Kou doesn't understand. She's never seen Evangelion.

"You never saw it? Not even Rebuild?"

Kou shakes her head slightly, and soft hair brushes Haru's chest where Kou's pillowed on her breasts.

"K... Next time I'm back, we're watchin' it all. And all the movies."

"Will I be appalled?" Kou almost sounds hopeful.

On the big flat-screen on one of the walls, a loop is playing of Unit 01 going berserk. Haru knows how that feels, to have a monster inside you.

"It's not hentai, you dummy."

The mirror on the ceiling shows them both, Kou nestled between Haru's legs: an unfamiliar ceiling. Haru insisted Kou kept her glasses on, the ones that correct her myopia, because the look is cute and unexpected for her. Kou's eyes should be brown, like her mother's, but they're green, and that's unexpected for her too.

Kou squirms against Haru, trying to get comfortable, and the accidental pressure of her back between Haru's legs is more arousing than any intentional caress. She wonders if Kou realizes how excited she is, until Kou starts to roll against her, a slow, gentle rhythm, toned muscles teasing her where she's most sensitive, and Haru gets as far as "I should be doing th..." before her body goes rigid. She digs fingernails into Kou's shoulder, leaving three bloodied

little arcs. She hopes they won't show through her shirt when she leaves.

The projection on the wall says *Sync Ratio 400%* .

That seems about right, Haru thinks.

They doze a little again, Haru's arms wrapped around Kou, hands cupping full breasts.

Kou's good at everything. She's smart, and beautiful. Strong and motivated. And there's a tender heart in there too, buried beneath the armor, which beats calmly: tempo adagio. But she's surprisingly awkward with physical intimacy: just taking her hand still makes her jump sometimes. She tries though, tries because she wants to be a considerate lover, because she feels she owes Haru something for all the time they haven't spent together. Haru smiles when she thinks of Kou studying books and articles, applying herself to the task with the same single-minded determination that she applies to everything else.

She's probably taking a correspondence course, or something.

Haru's not one for studying, though, at least when it comes to that; she prefers hands-on experience.

Kou's stomach is pleasingly soft, something that Haru can squeeze and stroke now that the concurrent challenges of studies and work leave less time for sparring. Muscles lurk beneath, though, so it's still best not to test her. Haru's fingers move lower, and bitten-down nails trace the curls of soft hair, sometimes pulling gently, making Kou shift her hips at each little tug; and then they move further, sliding with ease through the slick grove before coming to rest between her thighs. There's radiant warmth there, but Haru doesn't approach closer.

“You’re soaking, y’know that?”

Haru would drink from her, if she could; but that’s an exchange that Kou has yet to accede to. Still, Haru’s dreams are full of drowning in her, tongue moving in the warmth and the wetness of the precious tent of jet black hair, smothering herself in Kou’s water of life until she dissolves into nothingness.

“Don’t trouble yourself on my account.”

“Shhhh.” It’s Haru that seeks silence this time.

If Kou has a flaw, it’s that she’s always sacrificing herself. Even between the two of them, perhaps especially between the two of them, she can’t help but give, and give, and give, asking nothing in return. She finds it hard to say “I need” and even harder still to say “I want”. But this time Haru’s not willing to let Kou languish in self-denial - she presses gently, letting herself slide millimeters inside before drawing her hand up and letting her middle finger drag over Kou’s clit. Her other arm is pressed tight across Kou’s chest, index finger moving in circles round one dark nub, but from there she can feel Kou’s breath quicken, and she begins to move her hand over Kou’s folds, parting them gently, in perfect time with her heartbeat.

Kou’s hips move slightly, almost intangible on any absolute scale, but just enough to press herself harder against Haru’s hand. Now two fingers slide alternately inside her and across her, as Haru’s rhythm starts to quicken, obeying the motor of Kou’s heart. Haru presses her stomach against Kou’s back, thigh against thigh, desperate to make more contact with her as the heat starts to build. And then she feels Kou’s hand slide down her stomach, between the two of them, moving with purpose to where her own wetness is spreading. Gentle fingers circle her clit, mirroring her own movements, Kou’s instinct that this is what they’re both seeking.

She loses herself for a moment in that union, and then she feels Kou draw in a breath and hold it, straining her back, a gentle shuddering that starts from her groin as warmth spreads out from her. And then

Kou exhales, and Haru feels fingers press down where her own ache is growing. They're clumsy, slippery, the touch more a pinch than a caress, but it's so uncommonly wanton for Kou that the mere thought of it is enough to send Haru over the edge. She arches her back fully, driving her hips into the air, effortlessly lifting Kou off the bed as though she were weightless, suspending her, the pressure now causing Kou's fingers to slip deep inside. And as they do Haru almost calls out a name, and has to bite down on the edge of her hand to stifle a cry.

The mirrored ceiling shows them falling towards one another for a moment.

For a moment Haru thinks she can feel their minds bleed together into one.

There are tears then, as there sometimes are, as though Kou thinks experiencing pleasure is somehow a sin. But she doesn't push Haru away this time, doesn't bolt for the bathroom, locking the door and leaving Haru to talk her out gently; no, instead she pulls Haru's arm tighter around her, taking her hand, tethering the two of them together again. Haru wipes the tears with her free hand, then strokes her fingers over her lips - simple salt and Kou's scent, sadness and passion mixed up in one.

She runs fingers through Kou's hair, and kisses her head, and like that they sleep a while longer.

"Explain it again."

"First Impact is when the moon breaks away from the Earth. Second Impact's when Adam appears in Antarctica."

"And Third Impact?"

"I think that's what we just did."

That gets a smile; Haru sees it, a treasure visible in the mirror, and for a moment their eyes meet in reflections. They're sitting now, Haru resting against the wall, Kou resting against her. It should be the other way around, but Haru prefers it this way, because she feels she's protecting her, and because it's easier to run fingers over Kou's breasts, to barely touch the dark skin of her areolae and dance across her nipples until they stiffen in longing. One day, she hopes, her touch will break the seal on Kou's passion, and as she loses control, Haru will let herself burn up in her orbit.

Kou unpicks the embrace, and slips towards the bathroom, the unassuming movement that always signals the beginning of the end of the encounter. There's an unspoken question that claws at Haru's tongue, and she opens her mouth, feeling it catch on the back of her teeth.

Can we meet more often?

But she knows better than to ask that. It's another forbidden question, perhaps the most forbidden of all. Once a month turns into twice a month, turns into once a week, once a day, all day, every day, forever. And besides, just what is this really? A mad, summer romance; a few months of passion, and then tears, guilt and regret. If they ration it carefully, spin out their time over a few days per year, maybe it'll stretch out for both of their lifetimes, and the only tears will be the inevitable ones, at the end, for the one that leaves last.

There's a blast of warm air as Kou emerges from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her, tantalizingly short. Haru's glad she's not taken the robe, because that always confuses things, mixing up past, present and future.

The bed creaks slightly as she sits and starts to dress, pulling up short black stockings. The curve of her neck is magnetic and irresistible, and Haru runs a finger over it, delighted for a moment as Kou arches her back in response.

“Hey *Misato*, the knee-highs are a nice touch. A real turn-on.”

“They’re flight socks.”

“I knew that.”

“Of course.”

It’s a surprise attack - Kou turns and places a hand gently on Haru’s cheek, catching her off guard. The not-quite-smile is there, but it’s coupled with a look of such profound tenderness that it takes Haru’s breath away for a moment, and she blushes red like the warnings of A.T. fields that surround them. It’s not a look meant for this room; it’s not a look meant for this time.

“I thought tough chicks didn’t blush.”

“I-I’m not blushing, b-baka!”

Haru exaggerates as best she can, channeling the mannerisms of every *tsundere* she’s ever seen or read, hoping the big lie will pass unnoticed where a smaller one would be snared.

“Something red gone to your cheeks, then.”

“Just flushed with passion.”

The tucked corner has worked itself loose, and without its safe anchor Kou’s towel slides gently downwards, revealing pale skin still pink from the shower, and the tracery of scars highlighted white against it: the fingerprint of their shared history. Desire surges within her and Haru wants to throw herself onto Kou once more, to envelop her and to be enveloped.

But it’s too late now, Kou’s life here is almost over.

So for once Haru does the right thing, and gently takes the towel and secures it again. The half-smile is there still; the ambiguity of a test, or a missed opportunity.

“You should shower - you smell altogether too much of me. Someone will notice.”

The bathroom seems a galaxy away from the woman beside her as Haru rises.

I'd never wash it off, just so I could feel you beside me wherever I am.

But Kou's right; Kou's always right.

In the capsule of the shower Haru watches as clear water begins to turn grey. The hair dye is already washing out, and when she looks in the mirror she sees her black fringe now turned chestnut, intermediate autumn on its way to comet red. The color never takes - the best she's ever managed is a few hours of black or bleached blonde before her true form shows itself once again. She'd once even tried paint - *Tamiya X18 Semi Gloss Black* in a small bottle from a model shop - and when Kou had run her fingers through her hair it had come away in flakes, as though she'd touched the surface of some antique vessel: deception disintegrating beneath fingertips.

Kou's left her eyes by the mirror, green-tinted corrective contacts like precious jade bowls on the glass and chrome shelf, but when Haru puts on a robe and emerges with them she finds the room empty; only a bundle of bills and a note by the bed.

Just take a taxi back, and have something healthy for dinner.

The writing isn't just neat, it's painfully refined: Kou performing calligraphy with a cheap biro. The paper does double-duty as a makeshift wallet, and Haru wraps it carefully around the money, before slipping it into her jacket. Like the contacts, the note will go in her little box of treasures - keepsakes to comfort her when Kou's beyond the horizon. She laughs to herself, imagining Kou diligently persevering with the glasses as she leaves the hotel: cheap

prescription lenses from a convenience store trying to correct 20/10 vision.

Haru lies back on the bed; there's an hour or so of purchased time remaining - Instrumentality can play out as the background to dressing. On the screen, everything is turned to L.C.L. - Haru can feel it between her thighs too, as she thinks about Kou.

Maya is at her terminal, Ritsuko's hands gently over hers, as the world comes to an end.

INEEDYOU

Maya and Ritsuko. Haru and Kou. Kou on the neon-lit Shinjuku streets as she heads to the metro. Kou standing in the carriage, muscles sharply defined as her arm takes her weight, the train rocking and canting beneath her. Kou handing her passport to the perfect young woman at the check-in desk. Kou in the executive lounge drinking bitter tea. Kou moving skyward. Kou a thousand miles distant.

Haru and Kou. Maya and Ritsuko. Haru wonders for a moment, wonders whether they can get this room again, break Kou's rules just the one time, and role-play the end of everything.

INEEDYOU

She's willing to put the effort in for a Nerv uniform, to find one in a shop, or twist arms of her contemporaries (literally) until someone admits to owning one. And Kou, Kou just needs a blonde wig, and a beauty spot, and...

The thought of a lab coat makes her bite down hard on her lip to fight off tears. So she lies on the bed, and thinks of Kou straddling her, bare skin of her belly tantalizingly close to her own, one hand pressed to her shoulder, the other stoking hair from her face, and the tiny oceans of salt water from her eyes.

Why are you crying?

I can't say. I'd be breaking the rules.

She stays that way for a while, until the tears dry of their own accord, their tracks becoming fossilized river beds. She wants to touch herself again, to imagine Kou's fingers teasing and opening her, but there's no time; the countdown to Haru's extinction has begun, and she won't squander the yearning on hurried caresses here. No, better endured for the moment, even if that means the shameful subterfuge of a midnight foray to the bathroom, and the relative impossibility of satisfying herself, stifling her cries, and holding her cell so that it shows that one precious photo.

She slips sunglasses on as she leaves, even though the light is fading, but nobody's watching and nobody cares. Well away from the main street, down a tributary of an alley so narrow it's scarcely wide enough for one, Haru takes another look at the wad of bills: counting, folding neatly, and then slipping them inside her jacket again. She'll save them, just as she always does, and make sure she has a present for Kou when she returns: the cheap, white chocolate that's strangely precious, or an antique map perhaps, or maybe a scarf as the weather turns cold.

The last light left this passage a century ago, and when Haru looks upwards she can see stars now, and red-port, green-starboard of incoming flights. One final look, checking a salaryman isn't passed out among the boxes and bins, and then Haru momentarily braces, and propels herself upwards: a single sub-orbital leap that'll have her home ahead of any taxi or the evening's *shinkansen* .

As she passes 10,000 feet she comes within sight of a JAL 787 as it begins its turn away from Haneda, and for a moment catches a glimpse of a familiar face in a window in First Class, chin on hand, looking down towards lights in Shinjuku streets.

*Once, far over the breakers,
I caught a glimpse
Of a white bird
And fell in love
With this dream which obsesses me.*

- Yosano Akiko